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ABSTRACT

The influence of Cicero on the teaching of English composition is slight and in all likelihood diminishing. Among Cicero's beliefs were that rhetoric is the highest of vocations, thought and expression have an essential unity, the question "How should I live?" is paramount, the ideal orator maintains a unity of contemplation and action, character formation is crucial, and eloquence should be developed through stylistic imitation. Cicero's views differ in significant respects from those of Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato. Although current composition teaching is a complex and confused area, it may be said to encompass two major approaches, vocational and liberal. The vocational approach focuses on the writing of clear, well-organized prose, while the liberal approach stresses writing as a mode of personal expression and development. The gradual demise of the Ciceronian idea of character and its replacement by the modern idea of self have introduced a distinction between liberal and vocational education, thus eroding Ciceronian influence. Also, developments in higher education in applied science have resulted in a severely truncated conception of rhetoric as central to neither practical nor liberal education, further eroding Ciceronian influence. (GW)

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Cicero and English Composition

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My subject is the influence of Cicero on the teaching of English composition today. My thesis is that his influence is slight and in all likelihood diminishing. That might not seem an argument worth pursuing, but I hope that it will shed some light on Cicero's understanding of rhetoric, and on the theory or theories of rhetoric implicit in contemporary English composition courses. And if the argument is persuasive, it should also raise some questions about why Cicero's influence has declined so, thereby pointing some directions for research in the history of rhetoric.

To begin then, just who is this Cicero who might, but doesn't, influence the way writing is taught in the modern English curriculum. As the convention program quite correctly points out, he is not Aristotle. For Aristotle, rhetoric was a relatively minor concern, a concession to the regrettable fact that not everyone can follow the tightly structured arguments of the dialectician. For Cicero, rhetoric was the most important of human concerns; it was a system of general culture, the means by which people become a society. Aristotelian rhetoric leads to the discovery of techniques for engineering the consent of an audience in a particular situation. Ciceronian rhetoric is the pursuit of eloquence, "That governing force in every tranquil and free community." (De Oratore II, vii, 33)[1] To Aristotle rhetoric was simply a useful accomplishment; to Cicero it was a vocation--indeed, the highest of vocations.

But if Cicero is not Aristotle, neither is he Plato despite his self-conscious effort to make De Oratore look like the Phaedrus. (I, vii, 28) If, as Cicero claims (De Orat. II, xxviii, 160), Aristotle was somewhat disdainful of the art of rhetoric, the Socrates who speaks to us from the pages of Plato's dialogues was outright contemptuous of it. More specifically, and again as Cicero himself points out, Socrates "separated the science of wise thinking from that of elegant speaking," and he set the former well above the latter in importance. While Cicero admired Socrates, he lamented this "absurd and unprofitable and reprehensible severance between the tongue and the brain, leading to our having one set

of professors to teach us to think and another to teach us to speak." (De Orat. III, xvi, 60-61) Cicero insisted on the essential unity of thought and expression, which is, of course, why he could portray rhetoric as a system of general culture.

But in one important respect Cicero was like Plato: both of them were concerned ultimately with matters of conduct rather than knowledge. While Aristotle seems to have been most interested in the question, "What can I know?", both Plato and Cicero were more interested in the question, "How should I live?" And I think this is why they both turned to the dialogue form for presentation of their theories, albeit Cicero less consistently than Plato. Problems of knowledge lend themselves to exposition in the impersonal prose favored by Aristotle; but problems of conduct are problems of character, and so are more appropriately pursued in a context of diaglogue among particular characters. To that ultimate question, "How should I live?", both Plato and Cicero answer with an implicit injunction, "Live as this man lives." Plato's model is Socrates; Cicero's is the ideal orator, of which Crassus as portrayed in De Oratore is supposed to be a near approximation.

Yet it is equally important to note the contrast between the two models. Socrates as portrayed by Plato is the detached critic, standing apart from the affairs of public life the better to see error and folly. In the Apology, he argues that such a role is in fact essential to the well-being of society, that without a "gadfly" to stand above the hurly-burly we are doomed to stupidity and vice. Cicero's ideal orator is an altogether different sort; he is a participant in public life, not just a critic of it, and one gets the strong impression that he could have little patience with a Socratic gadfly. The ideal orator moves easily from the study to the forum, from contemplation to public affairs. His contemplation is enriched by practical experience, and his work as a man of affairs gains authority from his contemplation. To pursue one mode of life exclusively would for Cicero be as "absurd and unprofitable and repre-

hensible" as the Platonic "severance between the tongue and the brain." The essential unity of contemplation and action was for him a corollary of the unity of thought and expression.

The central point here is not a new one. Cicero's thinking was shaped by the already centuries-old battle between philosophers and rhetoricians, and he spoke as Socrates had long before him for peace and cooperation between the two. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates exposes the art of the rhetoricians as shallow trickery, unworthy of an intelligent person's consideration; in its place he offers the life of critical contemplation--of philosophy. Aristotle readmits rhetoric to the Academy, but only after redefining it as a decidedly minor concern necessitated by the unfortunate realities of civic life; the really important business of right thinking people remains the life of critical contemplation. Cicero agreed with the Socratic critique of non-philosophical rhetoric, and he scorned "Greeklings" who taught an art of rhetoric as heartily as Socrates had the sophists of his day. But Cicero saw too that the life of pure critical contemplation leaves civic affairs precisely as it finds them. Philosophy in the Academic tradition would abandon civic life to those very sophists and Greeklings it scorned. And so Cicero proposed the union of wisdom and eloquence, of philosophy and rhetoric in the character of his ideal orator.

The place of character in Cicero's program bears some emphasis. Perhaps even more than the great cultural status he gives to rhetoric, this emphasis on the character of the orator distinguishes Cicero's approach from that of Aristotle. Aristotle gives us an art, a set of techniques with a rationale for their use. An Aristotelian pedagogy will thus be conceived as training in skills and in the abstract principles governing their use. Cicero consistently underplays techniques of rhetoric in favor of traits of character to be developed in the orator. A Ciceronian pedagogy will thus be conceived as character formation, education in the original Latin sense of <u>rearing</u>. A curriculum in the Aristotelian sense will consist of subject matter -- a body of facts and relationships and principles

to be communicated to students by the teacher. A curriculum understood in the Ciceronian sense will consist of a program of activities engaged in by students under the guidance of the teacher, who stands in the position of a model for imitation. Education at the higher levels becomes a kind of apprenticeship, with the teacher standing as living example of what the student would be. Stylistic imitation, a practice strongly endorsed by Cicero and extensively used in Classical and Renaissance times, is thus a logical outcome of a concept of rhetoric and of education, an expression at the local level of a global concern. Aristotle's failure to mention the practice of imitation is consistent with his understanding of rhetoric as a set of useful skills rather than as the development of character. Rhetoric as a set of skills - an art - is abstract in that the skills are conceived as separate from the persons who make use of them. Ciceronian rhetoric is not abstract in this sense; an art of rhetoric is in his view of no value except as embodied in the eloquence of particular rhetors. The object of Ciceronian pedagogy is not to equip the student with a set of tools for use, but to develop in him the virtue of eloquence.

I turn now to the teaching of composition in the modern English classroom. Composition is today a large, complex, various, and above all confused field. Some of the confusion is suggested by the experience of a major foundation - I think it was Sloane - that decided to put some money into improving the teaching of composition and set about looking for people and institutions to support. They finally abandoned the effort because they could not find anyone whose ideas seemed worth supporting.

One reason for the great confusion of the field is that until very recently the teaching of writing was not a task that the English department took very seriously. Typically, the composition course was taught by graduate students and very new assistant professors who yearned for the day when they could devote themselves entirely to the serious business of teaching literature, a subject not

to be confused with writing. Now, under the combined influence of shrinking enrollments for literature courses and public clamor for a return to "the basics," more and more emphasis is being placed on composition. But there is little clarity about how or even why composition should be taught. Much of the literature in the academic journals that deal with composition is marred by shrill polemicizing on the one hand or a premature and narrow scientism on the other. Much of it is devoted exclusively to enthusiastic description of teaching methods that are claimed to "work." Too little of the professional literature is devoted to careful examination of the assumptions underlying courses in composition, with the result that the modern theory of composition remains largely undisclosed and therefore unexamined; it is implicit in textbooks, course syllabi and classroom practices.[2] What follows, then, must be regarded as one person's view - perhaps an oversimplified view - of a complex and changing field.[3] Caveat auditor.

In general, then, there are two major approaches to the teaching of composition, one in line with the view that education should be essentially training for a career, the other coinciding with a certain tradition of liberal education. I would note here that this division of the field, and of higher education generally into two camps, one vocational and one liberal, suggests immediately the irrelevance of Cicero. In distinguishing between career training and liberal education, we stand in opposition to him. The program that would form the character of Cicero's ideal orator was not liberal education only or vocational training only, nor was it vocational education plus liberal education. The concept of the ideal orator was a rejection of the idea that vocational and liberal education could be separated. The essential unity of the two is implied by the unity of contemplation and action, of thought and expression, of wisdom and eloquence.

The first or vocational approach to composition is roughly Aristotelian, insofar as it has a theoretical foundation. That is, it treats writing as a

useful accomplishment to be mastered through instruction in skills and the principles governing their use. The object of the composition course so-understood is to enable students to produce clear, well-organized, effective prose in edited standard English. To this end, they are schooled in a composing process that looks very much like the classical sequence of inventio, dispisitio, and elocutio, often with technical refinements derived from modern work in the social sciences. For example, Young, Becker and Pike's Rhetoric: Discovery and Change is regarded as highly innovative because it incorporates theoretical material derived from general systems theory, tragmemic linguistics, and Rogerian psychology; yet the composing process into which this material is incorporated differs in no significant respect from that of the Rhetorica ad Herennium. And in the strength of their concern to reduce rhetoric to a method, Young, Becker and Pike are precisely in accord with Aristotle.[4]

The second approach to composition begins from the assumption that writing can be a mode of personal expression, discovery and development, and it thus makes of composition an important element of liberal education.[5] The object of the course so-understood is not simply the development of useful skills, but self-knowledge and personal growth. Writing is not so much the end of the course as a means of disclosing one's own most fundamental beliefs and values. In writing, the student is thus discovering himself, and in making rhetorical choices he chooses the kind of person he wants to become.

On the face of it, this second approach looks something like Cicero's emphasis on character development as a central concern of rhetorical education, and it may in fact be traceable to the Ciceronian tradition in liberal education. But there is a very important difference. Cicero's emphasis was entirely on character, the public person manifested in action. He had no interest in what we call the self, or personality, or the inner person. In book three of the treatise On Duties, for instance, he argued that one's public duty -- the imperative of character --

always coincides with private interest, if only we understand our interest correctly. The argument leads inevitably to the conclusion that this self, the locus of private interest, must be a delusion if it deviates in any way from the public person, from character. Composition as self-discovery, by contrast, is centrally concerned with this inner realm of feeling and imagery, and it presumes the validity of the self however much it might deviate from public demands or actions.

What I am calling composition as self-discovery could only a few years ago be called "the modern trend in teaching composition,"[6] though I suspect that it never achieved the importance in curricular practice that it appeared to have in the professional journals. My impression is that today the field belongs increasingly to the advocates of composition as useful skill. The publication of E. D. Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition, a book that takes an uncompromising and well-argued position for writing as skill, will almost certainly add further support to a trend already accelerating. Hirsch is respected and articulate. The particular defects in his argument, and there are many, may simply magnify the book's influence in shifting emphasis away from composition as self-discovery, since they invite a whole series of professional debates in the field of composition as skill.[7]

But the question that most concerns us here is, how did we get from where we once were to where we are now? Cicero used to be a profoundly important figure. Education in the art of discourse, and in fact all of higher education, liberal and vocational, was conducted under the influence of his thinking. If my very cursory and schematic picture of the field of composition is even roughly correct, there is not much left of his influence today. Part of the explanation for this decline I have already hinted at. The gradual demise of the classical idea of character and its replacement by the modern idea of the self introduced a distinction between liberal and vocational education, a distinction that was anti-Ciceronian in the first instance, and that would inevitably work to the

disadvantage of liberal education, thus further eroding Ciceronian influence. English came into being as an academic discipline after the distinction had become a commonplace of modern culture. The literary climate in which the English department developed gave far more importance to the inner person - the self - than to character in the classical sense, and this consuming interest in self was further magnified by the discoveries of Freudian psychology. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that composition as taught in the English department has none of the Ciceronian emphasis on character.

Another factor that may have contributed to the decline of Ciceronian influence is the development of higher education in applied science during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute was one of the first schools of engineering in the United States, and it influenced the development of engineering curricula at other institutions by sending its graduates to them as teachers. From the beginning, RPI defined its educational goals and methods as different from those of more traditional institutions; the opposition between the education that it would provide and the "classical education" available at other colleges runs like a refrain through Rensselaer's history.[8] Educating engineers was thought of not as a particular development in the tradition of higher education but as a radical departure from that tradition, something new and quite different. Engineering education thus defined itself by a dialectical opposition to what it called classical education, and thus to the Ciceronian tradition that was strong in classical education. Eventually the importance of at least some elements of classical education would be recognized, but what has evolved is a curriculum that distinguishes sharply between professional education -- i.e., courses in science, mathematics and engineering -- and liberal education. Within the latter category a further distinction is made between "humanistic - social" courses and "skills" courses, with composition defined as a skills course. (This set of distinctions is not peculiar to RPI, but is used by the Engineering Council on

Professional Development in accrediting engineering curricula.) Something like the ancient opposition between education for the life of practical affairs and education for contemplation is thus established, but composition is excluded from both domains. The result is a severely truncated conception of rhetoric as something central to neither professional nor liberal education.

I would suggest finally that the evolution of English composition as an academic subject deserves serious attention by scholars in the history of rhetoric. What I have just offered is simply speculation on a couple of factors that I believe have influenced its development; a serious investigation remains to be done. I would suggest further that an account of English composition in the context of the history of rhetoric might help eliminate much of the confusion that surrounds the teaching of this subject.

NOTES

1. References are to the Loeb Classical Library edition of De Oratore, trans. by Sutton & Rackham.

2. An important move toward the development of coherent theory in composition is indicated by the publication of Gary Tate (ed.), Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays (Fort Worth: Texas Christian U. Press, 1976), and of the annual bibliographies of research in composition compiled by Richard Larson and published in the May issue of College Composition and Communication since 1975.

3. But my view of the field is roughly in agreement with that sketched by Wallace W. Douglas, review of The Philosophy of Composition by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., College English 40 (Sept. 1978), 90-99.

4. Another interesting text in the vocational skills tradition is Edward P. J. Corbett, The Little Rhetoric (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1977). In contrast to the Young, Becker & Pike text, Corbett's is quite frankly traditional and even bears a dedication to Aristotle. Perhaps more typical of the vocational skills approach are the multitude of so-called "handbooks" (e.g., The Harbrace College Handbook); most of these concentrate heavily on conventions of form, usage, mechanics and the like, and say little or nothing of the composing process. In effect, such texts reduce composition to revision and editing. This very limited view of composition is in fact more solidly established than the newer approach--represented by both Corbett and Young, Becker & Pike--that emphasizes invention as the foundation of the composing process. Composition as rewriting and editing has gained important new support with the publication of Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition.

5. I believe the most undiluted version of this approach is William E. Coles, Jr., Composing: Writing As a Self-Creating Process (Rochell Park, N.J.: Hayden Book Co., Inc.: 1974). More often self-discovery shows up as a tendency in texts that also emphasize composition as useful skill: see for example Michael E. Adelstein and Jean G. Pival, The Writing Commitment (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976) and W. Ross Winterowd, The Contemporary Writer (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975).

6. Glenn Matott, "In Search of a Philosophical Context for Teaching Composition," College Composition and Communication 27 (February 1976), 25-31.

7. The most recent issue of The Rhetoric Society Quarterly (Spring 1978), for example, carries two reviews of Hirsch's book and promises several more to come. A particularly interesting response to Hirsch is that of William Benzon, "Teach Them to Write," Modern Language Notes (forthcoming in December 1978). In contrast to the reviewers in the Quarterly, Benzon challenges none of Hirsch's assumptions about the nature and goals of the composition course, but he argues persuasively that there are major flaws in Hirsch's argument and serious practical dangers in the optimistic stance he bases upon it.

8. Samuel Rezneck, Education for a Technological Society: A Sesquicentennial History of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (Troy, N.Y.: Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 1968).